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There's no business without show-business: Self-reference as self-promotion

Karin Pühringer and Gabriele Siegert

In this paper on self-reference as self-promotion in the media, we are not arguing from a linguistic point of view but rather from a communication studies, or more precisely, from a media economics perspective. Our interest is not only to determine the many forms and varieties of self-thematization in the media but also to examine the responsible economic agents and their motives in this context.

Our characterization of the media is a classical one. The media are the journalistic output providing topics for public communication. We agree with Siegfried J. Schmidt (1996) that the concept of media comprises a variety of phenomena, such as materials of communication and information (e.g., newspapers), organizations producing, supplying, and distributing the media (e.g., publishing houses or broadcast stations), and often also this media system as a whole. According to this concept, thematization occurs in quite different domains of the media. Thus, self-reference or self-thematization in the media concerns media organization, that is, the newspapers or journals, the radio or television stations and programs, as well as the media system as a whole, and these various manifestations of the media mean rather different forms and formats.

1. Background

The media have become increasingly self-referential. In advertising, for example, self-thematization and self-promotion are constitutive elements of the medium. Media pages in newspapers, commercial spots or ads for media products, TV parodies, and more and more program trailers testify to the omnipresence of self-reference in the media.

It is a commonplace that we live in a media and information society. Hence, the media (and its supply, i.e., programs and actors) are significant in all spheres of social life. If it is the function of the media to monitor society and to reflect this task, self-thematization is a direct consequence of this function because by observing themselves, the media observe a significant sector of social life.

With their critical eye, the media strengthen the decision-making skills and the citizens' responsibilities. In many important ways, the media act as mediators for authorities by informing the population about what is happening in the world. In his study of recipient-ratings on media coverage, Thomas Quast (1999) found out that 96.5% of the persons asked quote audience-oriented media as their source of knowledge and 63.7% report them to be their primary source. In other words, almost everything we know *about* the media, we know *from* the media.

Different forms of self-reference evince different possibilities of development on the market. Promotional types of self-thematization, especially in the form of house ads (see below), benefit from the current general conditions of media markets. As far as media firms are concerned, the much discussed economization and commercialization of the media entail a general engagement in activities aiming at profit and profit-orientation. The media want to make money in the first place. Return on investment (ROI) measures how much profit an owner makes relative to the amount of investment required to make that return. Firms seek the highest possible return on investment. Thus, when a media company compares two competing investment options, it usually invests in the one with the higher ROI potential. Furthermore, media firms are highly competitive about audience favor and advertising investments.

Although strong competition cannot be found at all levels, economic pressure has consequences. Media firms do not only want to produce economically; they also tend to be active as to marketing measures. The cost orientation calls for self-reference. Using archive materials, for example, is a means of cost saving, since the pictures need not be bought elsewhere (cf. Bleicher 1994, 1999 and this vol.).

Even though media companies make great efforts to distinguish themselves from their competitors and communicate in which respect they differ from them, it is not easy to express these differences, especially when products and performances are very similar. Furthermore, media companies are often accused of differentiating their own products insufficiently from other products. When media companies evince too little product differentiation, only the strategy of communication remains as a means of accentuating the existing distinctions in programming and the resultant added value for the consumers. Brand identification is another important potential for differentiation. Consumers tend to develop brand loyalty over time, and therefore, having a clearly defined brand is a long term advantage. According to Jacobs and Klein (2002), media managers began only in the mid-1990s to develop distinct brand identities in order to differentiate their stations, networks, and publications from those of their competitors.

Due to the information overload in present-day information society, attention has become a rare commodity, so that it is decisive for the survival of competitors to attract as much consumers' attention as possible. The situation is further

aggravated by a basic media economic principle: media products are experience and credence goods. Therefore, the recipients' possibilities of evaluating media supply are restricted. The quality of an entertainment show, for example, can only be assessed after watching the program; the evaluation of the quality of a news program is practically impossible as long we know nothing else about the events reported in it. Thus, the consumers' experience of the product gives only a limited possibility of deciding which channel or program to select. For this reason, media organizations offer, as an alternative, information about the quality of their products, for example by signaling and creating expectations, trust, and credibility.

To sum up, due to the economic circumstances and the professionalism in the methods of media marketing, it has become crucial for media companies to introduce a mix of communication instruments including direct advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, trade fairs, or exhibitions as well as sponsoring and event marketing. Our interest in this study lies in widely used formats, such as media house advertising (see below), cross-promotion, media PR (public relations), or editorial references. These formats are not always clearly defined and they differ considerably as to their levels and strategies of self-thematization. Figure 1 represents these levels, in the form of a scale extending from low to high degrees of self-reference (Siegert and Pühringer 2001: 255).

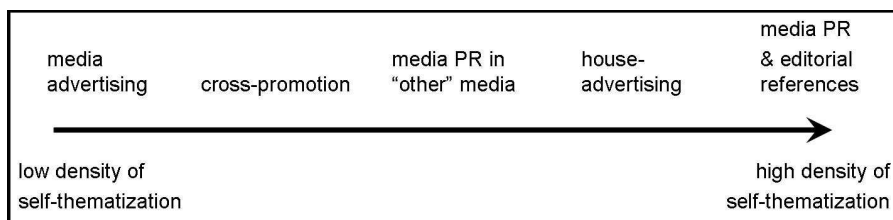


Figure 1. Self-thematization in selected instruments of communication

Depending on the stage of the development of the station and its programs, the instruments of communication vary. In the company's phase of foundation when its brand is still relatively unknown, more external media will be used. In subsequent phases of development, the company tends to use more frequently house ads or editorial references. In its period of consolidation, advertising spending can be reduced because the company can use its own media as vehicle for advertising. Branding, a key concept in media economics, is used by the media companies as a way of creating identity awareness in connection with the content of the products. Most audiences and most advertisers recognize brands, and for this reason, larger media companies have invested billions of dollars to develop and acquire the different brands on the market (Albarran 2004: 300).

House ads are advertisements which the company positions in its own media supply, in spots for its own brand, programs, shows, titles, stars, show masters, or news casters. House ads are self-referential insofar as advertisers, the advertising vehicle or medium, and the object of advertising are, or belong to, one and the same media. As Karstens and Schütte (1999: 109) demonstrate, television is both a media product and a media for advertising this product. The same can be said of most other media. Among the various forms of self-reference by means of house ads, two types can be distinguished, the more informative ones and the more manipulative ones. Station promos evidently have a strong promotional character, but it is more difficult to describe, for example, the forms of self-reference of trailers and teasers. Their function, by the way, is similar to newspaper editorials. Trailers, teasers as well as newspaper editorials inform and give orientation, and they are also rather manipulative. According to Siegert and Pühringer (2001: 261–262), two subtypes of house ads can be distinguished, house ads with program-reference and house ads without program reference. Forms of house ads with direct program reference are:

- *teaser* before and after commercial breaks; references to the following program, to commercials, or to other forms of intermission
- *teaser in split screen*, e.g., during end titles; visual/verbal (voice over) reference to next, daily, monthly, or other programs
- *episode* or *serial trailer*: reference to next serial or next newscast
- traditional *program announcement* (separate from the program)
- *trailer*: has replaced traditional program announcement announcing daily or weekly program
- *horizontal trailer*: weekly or monthly thematic orientation (no particular program)

Forms of house ads without direct program-reference are:

- *passage*: separates program from commercials before and after breaks
- *station promos*: image advertising to create awareness, identity, and relationship
- *merchandising spots*: advertising for articles or services of the broadcast station
- *event advertising* for organized or co-organized events of various kinds (e.g., cultural or sporting events)
- *consumer invitation* for consumer participation: “give us a call”, “visit our website”, etc.

2. Research questions

According to the results of previous studies, it remains unclear to which degree house ads lead to a fragmentation of the TV program in which they are inserted. Our studies are hence guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: Which house ads are presented by the different broadcast stations?

RQ2: To what extent are house ads introduced on daily TV program?

RQ3: Did the frequency and features of house ads change between 2000 and 2005?

3. Methods of Study 1 and Study 2

Study 1: In 1999/2000, in a first content analytic study, we examined approximately 240 hours of TV program of twice 24 hours from a midweek day and a weekend day of the following television stations: ORF 1, ORF 2 (two Austrian public-service broadcasters), ARD (Germany, public-service broadcaster), RTL and ProSieben (two German commercial broadcasters).

Study 2: The second study of 2005 was a 250 hour content analysis study of the program of eight Swiss TV stations, the public-service stations SF 1 and SF 2 (German), TSR 1 (French), and TSI 1 (Italian), and the commercial stations Tele Züri (German), Leman Bleu (French), Tele Ticino (Italian), and Sat.1 Switzerland (from Germany with Swiss license). This research was commissioned and financed by the Swiss *Federal Office for Communication* (BAKOM).

4. Findings of Study 1

In Study 1 we found 1,365 units of content with self-referential features outside the actual program, which can be divided into units with and units without program reference (Figure 2).

The self-referential breaks and intermissions in commercial broadcasters are between two and three times as many as with public-service broadcasters (ORF 1, ORF 2, ARD). However, there is no major difference between public-service and commercial television stations as far as the use of form of self-reference without program-reference is concerned. In all of the TV station analyzed in this study there was a high frequency of program related forms of self-reference. The reason behind these findings is the stations' increasing effort to attract regular and loyal costumers for their programs in the future.

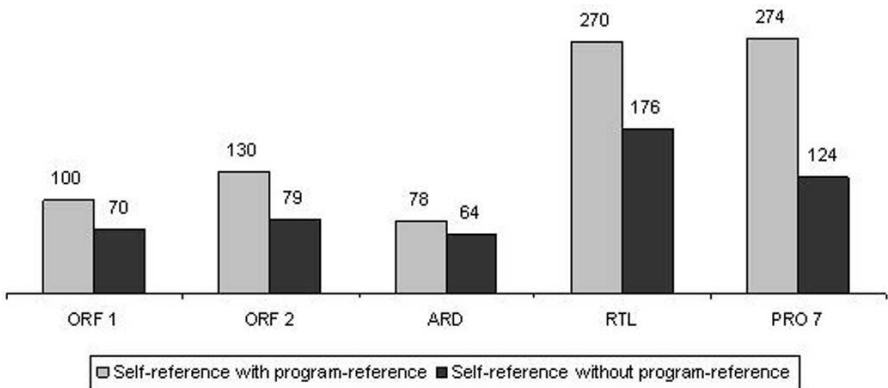


Figure 2. Self-referential units with and without program reference (n = 1,365)

Based on the distinction between self-reference in house ads with and without direct program reference introduced above, the study adopted the following coding categories in its analysis of the units of self-reference: trailer and teaser, trailer and teaser in split-screen, opener (the former program announcement), passage, image and media spot (station promo), merchandising spot, and consumer invitation (cf. Figure 3).

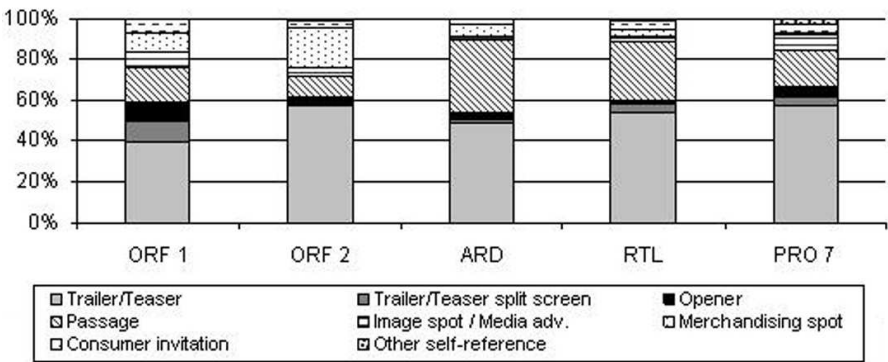


Figure 3. Dimensions and frequencies of self-referential house ads (n = 1,365)

As shown in Figure 3, the most frequently used types of self-referential house ads are the trailer and teaser forms, followed by the passages. The frequency of the indirectly program referential *trailers* and *trailers* reflect the stations' efforts to address the recipients' memories and develop their program loyalty. The frequency of the directly program referential *passages* reflects the (still)

high number of commercial breaks of the traditional kind whose beginning and end the passages indicate. The number of almost every type of self-referential house ads is significantly higher for commercial television stations. For example, RTL broadcasts nearly four times as many teasers and trailers than ORF 1 (240 to 67) or six times as many passages than ORF 2 (132 to 21).

5. Findings of Study 2

In Study 2 we found 2,713 units of content with characteristics of self-reference outside the actual program. The results are similar to the findings of Study 1, but Study 2 also investigated television broadcasts themselves. We found 1,039 self-referential units within the television programs but for reasons of comparability with Study 1, the diagram of the frequency of the self-referential units in Study 2 (Figure 4) excludes the latter instances of self-referential advertising within the programs.

With the exception of SF 2, the second German speaking public-service broadcasting channel, the results of Study 2 show that there has been a reversal of the trend documented in Study 1: In 2005, seven of eight stations show a higher frequency of self-referential units of content without program reference and a lower frequency of units with program reference, with the peak of Tele Züri, the commercial local TV station in the Zürich region.

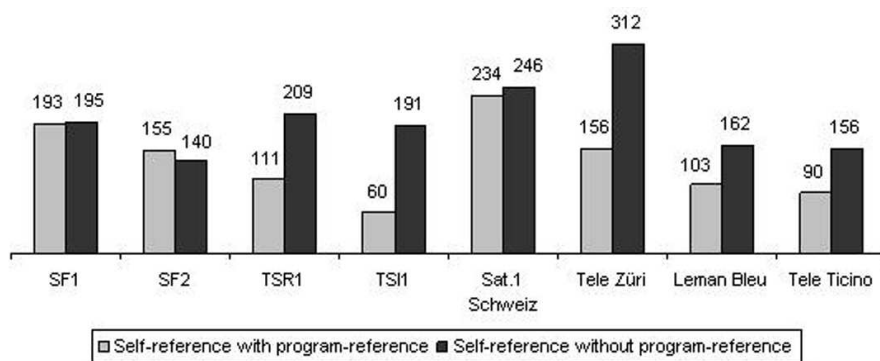


Figure 4. Frequency of self-referential units with and without program-reference (n = 2,713)

The programs of the commercial television stations evince 583 units with program reference and 876 units without program reference. The public-service

stations evince 519 units with program reference and 735 units without program reference (Figure 4). Distinguishing the same coding categories as Figure 3 (of Study 1), Figure 5 shows that the most frequently used types of self-referential house ads found in the sample of 2,713 units are once again the trailer/teaser and the passage.

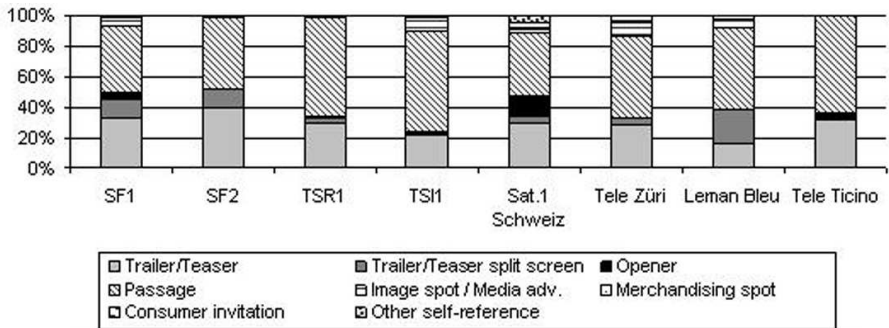


Figure 5. Dimensions and frequencies of self-referential house ads (n = 2,713)

Figure 6 shows the development in the frequency of the use of the various forms of self-referential and self-promotional house advertising and allows the comparison of the frequencies of Study 1 (1999–2000) with those of Study 2 (2005). The data concerning the relative frequencies testify to a decrease of the trailer and teaser type of self-reference and an increase of the passage type of self-reference or self-promotion without program reference from 2000 to 2005.

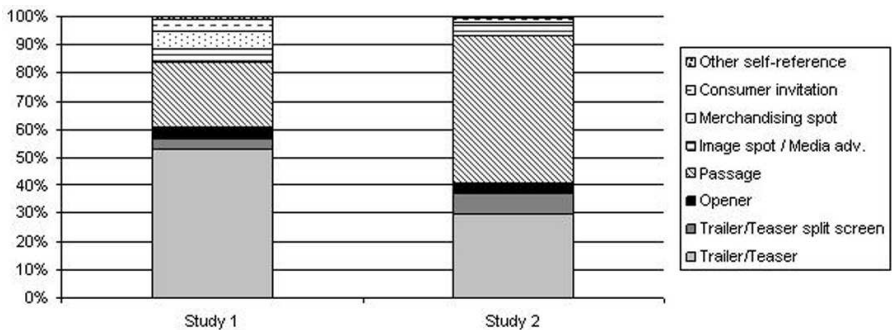


Figure 6. Types of house ads in Study 1 and in Study 2

What are the answers to our three research questions in the face of these findings? RQ1 raised the question which types of self-referential house ads are used by the different broadcast stations. Answers are given in Figure 3 and Figure 5

where eight different types are distinguished, trailer and teaser, trailer and teaser in split-screen, opener (the former program announcement), passage, image and media spot (station promo), merchandising spot, and consumer invitation. Answers to RQ2 concerning the frequency according to which the house ads are introduced in daily television programs can equally be found in Figures 3 to 5 and in the ensuing comments.

Let us now propose answers to RQ3 concerning the development of the features of self-reference in the house ads between 2000 and 2005. Despite the differences in the development of the self-referential house ads between 2000 and 2005 in the stations investigated in both studies, the similarities remained relatively stable as far as the comparison between public-service and commercial broadcasters are concerned. Our findings indicated a number of interesting new trends in the use and the structural features of house ads of 2005 as compared to those of 2000. For instance, the types of house ads changed from 2000 to 2005. In 2000, *trailer and teaser* was the most frequent format. In 2005 it was displaced by the *passage* type, and this development confirms, as discussed above, the trend to a more segmented and structured television program.

Overall, there has been a significant increase in the form and frequency of self-referential house advertising with the purpose of self-promotion. In 2000, an average of 5.7 units were identified in any of the 240 hours of broadcasting investigated in Study 1. In 2005, the weighted average rose to 10.3.

6. Conclusions

The media play an important part in our society, addressing citizens as consumers and customers and providing a major source of knowledge.

The media compete for the audience as well as for advertising investments, and the resulting pressures, among others, have consequences for the structures of the daily program. The two studies presented in this paper have given evidence that the pressure for commercial television stations is stronger than the one for public-service stations. For this reason, commercial stations have a more fragmented program structure and there has been a significant increase in their self-referential promotional content with the goal of creating brand awareness to make brands distinctive. Study 2 has also shown an increase in the frequency of program-integrated forms of self-reference for the purpose of self-promotion. Like in similar general trends in advertising, this increase reflects the great efforts made to attract the consumers' attention and to avoid their channel-hopping during program breaks.

The two studies presented in this paper do not pretend to give a complete picture of the many ways in which broadcasters have become self-referential,

nor do they claim to offer conclusive evidence about current and future trends in television, not even as far self-promotional house ads are concerned. Nevertheless, the paper may have given an instructive example and informative empirical evidence of the role and the increasing importance of self-reference in the media.

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Part VI. Self-referential games

